

A SOLDIER OF COMMERCE

BY JOHN ROE GORDON

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE RIDE TO SILOON PASS.

THE people of the village swarmed to look at the strangers, who seemed to be of a race they looked upon as enemies, yet their chief, Palpak, treated these men as friends. Palpak was a chief who gave no explanations of his acts, and when he demanded horses for himself, his brothers and his friends they were at once forthcoming.

Domitan, the brother who had been so eager to kill Palpak, was morose and showed but little favor to the guests. The latter, confident that their plans would be successful, treated him considerably. They thought not of the risk they ran in going, with robbers for escort, into a country from which few travelers had ever returned. The moving power was love, and love laughs at danger.

From the village a winding path led from the low shore land to a distant range of hills. Along this their progress was rapid; but, arriving at the hills, they found a rugged, rocky road over which traveling was slow. The small horses of the Zannucks were sturdy animals and went unshod over the jagged stones that covered the narrow path.

The natives stared at them in amazement. A Russian officer in uniform, accompanying their chief on terms of friendship, was a scene they had never contemplated. Some thought Orskoff was a prisoner, though he did not act like one. Harvey seemed actually to be the leader.

Hidden among great knolls and sequestered in fertile valleys were little villages seemingly devoted to peaceful pursuits. Flocks of the world famous sheep, the skins of whose lambs are sent to Persia, where they are made into garments or cured and sent to Europe and America, were browsing on the hill-sides.

All the herdsmen bore arms. One would have a rifle; another wore a belt in which two or three pistols were thrust; some carried the old time spear. Their garb was most picturesque. The turbaned Turk, the jaunty Cossack, the jacketed Greek, none of these could match the gay dress of these hill-men.

The road grew rougher and more difficult. They climbed laboriously, stopping often to give their horses a breathing spell. On either side the jagged rocks rose to great heights and the mountains stood majestically about them.

"No wonder these people cannot be subdued," said Harvey. "Nature has built for them a fortress that no guns can batter down."

"The trouble is," said Orskoff, "that nature does this only where a fortress is not necessary. When it comes to guarding a city, placing a battlement upon a passage between two seas, nature may be gracious enough to bestow a rock or two, but they must be fashioned by the hand of man to suit the purpose of defense."

"The reason is not that nature is grudging," said Harvey. "It is that man is so stubborn that he establishes his cities in places where they can be established. Nature's fortifications are in places where no one ever wants to go."

"Except ourselves at the present time. Hello! There is a big town."

They had reached a high point in the road and looked down a sloping stretch into a valley, where a town was laid out that called forth exclamations from both. Amid green and luxurious surroundings, on the banks of a little river that found its devious way into the Scythian gulf, this city of the Zannucks was laid out with a precision that would do credit to an English or American town. Following the almost straight line of the river, the main street stretched a half mile. On this were the principal bazaars and market places, with drainage directly into the river. At right angles to this were other streets, with houses of stone or wood, ornamented according to the taste of the owners, each having a little patch of green and fruit trees and garden.

"Orskoff," said Harvey, pointing to an elevation back of the town, "probably the only thing this town lacks is good drinking water. I'd like to put up one of my windmills and a pump right there. I'll ask Palpak for a concession when the other business is over."

"So confident are you in the success of the expedition that you can talk of windmills?"

"I've talked windmills all my life. I made them when I was a boy. I can pick out a likely spot for one with my eyes shut."

Harvey was interrupted by the impetuous welcome given to the return-

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ing chief.
"Hail, Palpak, chief of the Zannucks!" cried the people, men, women



"Listen, O my people!"

and children rushing to surround the party. "What hast thou brought to pay the terrible tax the ameer has put upon us?"

"Much treasure, my children! It is well. These are my friends, to whom you must show hospitality."

"We will! We will! Thy friends are our friends, O Palpak!"

"There is much to be said. The treasure will be guarded until the tax of the ameer is paid. But there is something to be done now. Let my captains come to me while we eat and rest. We must hasten away to obtain more treasure and perform a service for my friends."

He led them to the finest house in the place, where women waited upon them. Wine and food were brought. When they had finished, Harvey and Orskoff smoked and listened to the parley between Palpak and his captains. There were ten of these, including the brothers of Palpak. Domitan was second in command by reason of his relationship as next eldest brother of Palpak.

"Is war declared?" asked one of the warriors. "Have the hated Muscovites again threatened us?"

"No; it is not war against the Muscovites."

"What, then, O chief? Inform us that we may fight as becomes the Zannucks."

"A caravan conveying much treasure and that which is greater than

treasure, of more value than gold or gems, will pass on the way to Bokhara. It will be composed of the servants and soldiers of the ameer, who has so frequently sent soldiers to murder us and steal our children and compelled us to pay tribute. These soldiers of the ameer have stolen two beautiful girls, who were to be the wives of my two friends. I was in difficulty, and this one, the American, assisted me and saved my life. The other, a Muscovite officer, had us in his power, but released us that we might bring the tribute to you, my people. In return I have told them that we would go to the Siloon pass and rescue the young women they love so well."

"We are ready! Horses will be brought from the fields! Great is Palpak, chief of the Zannucks!"

Palpak waved his hands for silence and, assuming a serious mien, said:

"Listen, O my people! Before we start I have something to submit to my captains. It was at the cave where we hid the treasure. I had divided it according to my custom—a portion to each of my brothers, a portion to myself, and the greater bulk to be brought here and divided among my people and to pay the tax demanded of us by the ameer. My brothers rebelled against my decision and, led by Domitan, attacked me to take my life. I was assisted by the American, as I have said, and then the Russian soldiers came and captured us all. But the crime of Domitan remains. It is the custom for the captains to settle upon a punishment."

"Kill him! Fasten him on a spear and place him high!"

These cries came from all sides. Domitan turned pale. He looked appealingly at Palpak, but the face of the chief was as stone.

"O chief!" said a captain, rising. "It is well that the Zannucks know their chief to be always safe. If he is in danger from his own brothers, then what may we expect from others? If these brothers have attempted to kill thee, they should be punished. It is the will of the people that he whom they love shall be protected and those who seek to kill him shall themselves be slain."

"It is so," said another captain, "but this took place far away. Let us give Domitan and the other brothers of our chief an opportunity to explain their conduct."

"It is well spoken," said Palpak. "Let my brother Domitan, next in the line of chiefs, who will be your chief if I should die, explain his action."

All eyes were turned toward Domitan.

"O chief, my brother," he cried, "and captains of the Zannucks, hear me and believe me! When we started in our boat to the island cave to obtain the treasure and bring it here, there was no thought against our brother, the greatest chief the Zannucks ever had.

We love him well, but we drank much wine, and in our wine madness thought to overcome him and obtain the treasure. In our right minds we would not think of this. Humbly do we seek pardon of our chief. We promise faithful allegiance. We will fight by his side evermore."

There was a murmur, and all eyes turned to Palpak.

"It will be well if this is true," he said. "I trust my brothers again. I wish no confusion now. We will have ten to meet the soldiers of the ameer."

There was little delay. Horses were being led in from nearby fields, and men with arms were gathering. On the road to the southward they formed, and it seemed a formidable array. First rode Palpak, with Harvey and Orskoff, mounted on fresh horses. After them rode a hundred men, divided in bands of twenty-five, each under a captain. Then came another hundred under Domitan, these being divided the same way.

Harvey had never experienced so difficult a ride. At times they seemed on the verge of going over a cliff and hurling themselves a hundred feet or more to certain death, but the rugged little horses seemed to know every inch of the way and found stepping places where a man could not as they wound around the perpendicular scarps of mountains.

"I wouldn't like to do this for a living," said Harvey. "I prefer to sell windmills."

"This is real mountaineering," answered Orskoff. But their eyes did not meet as they spoke, for Harvey, who was ahead, did not dare to turn his head.

In crossing table lands they traveled in sections, and Domitan often came up and spoke to Palpak. He had lost none of his surliness. Harvey could not understand why Palpak so easily forgave the man who wanted to kill him. Orskoff explained that he had talked with the captains and learned that Domitan was much admired for his many exhibitions of bravery.

"It is a good thing for us that Domitan is not chief," said Orskoff. "He hates us sorely."

They camped at night in a ravine, and the cooks of the companies prepared a meal consisting mainly of a sort of cake and coffee. After partaking of a goodly quantity Orskoff and Harvey lay down near Palpak and went to sleep.

In the morning, refreshed, the cavalcade set out and passed another day in even more difficult traveling. Another night they camped on an open field, and on the third day they came to rest on a cliff overlooking the Siloon pass.

Wilson carries a nice line of Tablets, Pencils, Pens, Ink, etc. for the School children.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ATTACK ON THE CARAVAN.

ON the morning, after waiting and watching all night, the caravan was discovered slowly making its way along the pass. Palpak called Harvey and Orskoff to him at the edge of the cliff.

"We will attack the caravan in this way," he said. "My men are now divided, and one-half is under my brother Domitan, who is very brave and a good officer. His section will go up the pass to head off the camels if they bolt and run beyond our reach. My own section will attack at this spot. You will be with me."

"I should say so," said Harvey. "We want to be in this business from start to finish."

"But it would be safer to remain hidden."

"It would be impossible. Orskoff is a fighting man and would not remain idle while his sweetheart is in danger. I am not a fighting man, but I could not remain in hiding while you were fighting for the girl I love."

Domitan came up.

"It will be well for us to plan, my brother," he said. "The caravan will soon be here."

"We have already planned," said Palpak sternly. "You will take your men farther up the pass. Lie in wait there. If the camels bearing the young women escape, you can capture them. I will remain here and attack."

"Heretofore I have been asked in councils," said Domitan surlily.

"You will obey," said Palpak.

"It is evident," said Harvey to Orskoff, "that, though he forgives, he does not forget."

Domitan soon had his men under way. They took a winding path through the woods leading to the pass.

"I trust there will be as little bloodshed as possible," said Harvey to Palpak. "We want to get the girls, but do not wish to commit unnecessary murder. These soldiers are simply obeying orders, as your own men are doing."

"We will save your women, but the rest of the matter must be left to us. I see by the size of the caravan that there is much treasure."

The caravan came on. Riding ahead was an officer of the ameer in brilliant garb. Following him were twenty horsemen, all well armed. Then came two camels, each led by a soldier. The first bore in its howdah the girl intended for the bride of the prince. Alma was in the second one. She still wore the uniform of the inspector general of prisons. Then came twenty more horsemen, a string of camels and mules bearing merchandise of all kinds and horses on which rode Turkish, Persian and Hebrew merchants.

Silently Palpak led his men down a steep and difficult path. They waited in hiding till the head of the caravan

was opposite. A peculiar cry from Palpak sent them dashing into the road. Palpak's men had left their horses above on the cliff and were at a disadvantage, but they outnumbered the Bokharans. At the first volley three of the ameer's soldiers fell from their horses. A terrific outcry followed, but the officer in command was brave and calm and soon rallied them. They formed in a circle around the camels bearing the two girls, while the merchants and the camels bearing their goods scuttled for safety. Palpak rallied his men and led them in a ferocious onslaught, but the direct and steady



The iron arms of the American were around his neck
fire from the mounted riflemen of the ameer sent a dozen of them to the ground.

Palpak shouted out his commands and formed his men for a rush, but the ameer's men were first, and the horses came dashing upon the Zannucks. For a time it looked like a victory for the Bokharans. Orskoff and Harvey were compelled to run aside when the ameer's horsemen came upon them.

The battle of the ameer's men was being waged chiefly by the officer in command, who seemed not to know the word fear and who seemed to be impervious to bullets. Mounted on a fine horse, he led every charge. Harvey saw that so long as the Bokharans were inspired by this officer they were well nigh invincible. He watched his chance to cope with the commander in person.

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